

## Penitential Psalms 143 and 6: Cries for Justice and Mercy

One benefit of *praying the psalms* is how they keep reminding us of our own and every other person's limited humanity. Seeing and/or experiencing human limitation can open our hearts to God's ways of living:

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy (*hesed*), and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8

Lent is a penitential season of repentance, of changing and turning away from whatever doesn't fit with God's ways for us. It's a time of humble realization of and regret for self-referenced thinking, speaking, and acting that doesn't make space for God or acknowledge God's sovereign presence.

*Praying the psalms*, especially the 7 penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) for Lenten repentance, keeps our necessary dialogue with God open and makes a space for us to listen and to respond to His Word with our own laments, complaints, cries for help, and praises for assurance of protecting, guiding Presence.

**1.** Read **Psalm 143** aloud. (Fun facts: The Eastern Church's liturgy begins each day with the same 6 psalms: 3, 38, 63, 88, 103, and 143. The Western Church [starting with the Benedictines] prays Psalm 143 Christologically every Saturday morning to prepare for Sunday worship.)

What do you learn about the psalmist's understanding of himself and of God from **143:1-2**?

**2.** In **143:3-4**, what do you learn about "the enemy's" impact on the psalmist's life? What experiences have you had yourself, seen, or heard about that fit with the psalmist's description?

**3.** According to **143:5**, this is not our psalmist's "first rodeo." He has past experience with what God has done, with how God has worked. Notice what he models for us in **143:6**. Share your thoughts and feelings about what he is modeling and how his model might impact you.

**4.** The urgency of **143:7**, "Answer me quickly, O LORD!," the central cry of the psalm, leads the crescendo of 11 petitions in **143:7-12**. Identify the petitions and list or underline them. Which one(s) might form your prayer for yourself or someone else right now?

Also notice that following all but one of the petitions is a reason for the petition. Which of these "reasons" is especially important to you right now?

5. What do **143:11-12** reveal about how the requests in verse 11 (“Preserve my life...bring my soul out of trouble”) lead to the “imprecations” of verse 12 (“cut off my enemies...destroy all the adversaries of my soul”)?

In the *New Bible Commentary* discussion of **Psalms 143**, J.A. Motyer observes:

We are at ease with **verse 11** and could and do pray such a prayer, but in reality the “bland” terms of **verse 11** include the “harsh” requests of **verse 12**, for this is the way the Lord deals with unjust accusations (Deut. 19:16-19). There are circumstances (like David’s) where there is no deliverance without destruction and to pray for the one is to pray for the other. (Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, 580)

How do you think Jesus’ teaching and model of praying for enemies fits with praying for the destruction of “adversaries of my soul” (**143:12**)?

(The Hebrew literally means “foes of my life,” suggesting implacability or the desire to kill the person. From Robert Alter’s *The Book of Psalms*, 494)

6. In summary, **Psalms 143**’s message is, “Faith in the grace and love of God is the basis of prayer for protection and guidance in this wicked world.”

We know that “this wicked world” includes people who have been abused, treated unjustly, and severely persecuted. Perhaps that’s part of your own experience or the experience of someone you know or know about. And for many the suffering continues.

How might the imprecatory words in the psalms help you pray for and work for justice locally, nationally and internationally, and to pray for the persecuted Church?

Read **Psalms 6** aloud. The ESV Study Bible describes this individual lament as being “especially suited to one whose hard circumstances have led him to see his sins and to repent of them.” (ESV Study Bible, 1060)

1. What do you learn about the psalmist in **6:1**? The Hebrew word order of **6:1** is striking: “O LORD, not in your anger reprove me, and not in your wrath chasten me.” What is he asking of YHWH in **6:1**?

This is the second mention of YHWH’s *wrath* in the Psalter; the first is in Psalm 2:12. (See also Psalm 95:11, the end of a warning to listen and to stay open-hearted to God instead of hardening your heart with distrust and independence.) We know that Christ experienced the “wrath of God” on our behalf on the cross in the defeat of sin and death. All of God’s Holy love for us, his image bearers, was directed in holy indignation/anger against sin. (I think of God’s *wrath* as his

consistent opposition to evil in all of its manifestations.) Ponder where you are in your understanding of God's wrath in Lent 2021.

**2.** So our psalmist knows he needs correction and discipline and he combines these verbs with repeated mention of God's anger/wrath and then a description of intense suffering **(6:2-3)** The most plausible conclusion is that he has sinned. (Ross, *Psalms, Volume 1*, 263)

What experiences of his great need for the LORD's help resonate most with you? **(6:2-7)** What puzzles you? ("Remembrance" and "praise" are parallel in verse 5 and refer to public worship—speaking well of the LORD, boasting about him in the assembly.)

**3.** **6:3** starts with the psalmist telling us that "my soul," his whole being is "greatly troubled." "But you, O LORD" in **3b** contrasts with it sharply. This question is unfinished. The sentence is simply broken off because of the extreme frustration and stress. When he starts praying again in **4a**, what is the basis of his request?

**4.** Not only is the psalmist suffering mentally, physically, and emotionally from his own sin, but his *enemies* are "piling on," taking advantage of his weakened condition. **(6:7, 8, 10)**

**5.** Like many laments, the mood changes abruptly in **6:8**, "Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping." (See Jesus' use of these words in Luke 13:27.) What does the psalmist seem to be understanding about the role of his *enemies* in his suffering?

Pouring out his grief about his sin and his enemies to God brings him back to God-centeredness, back to faith and trust, back to depending on God to make things right.

What are your thoughts about this quote?:

What makes this psalm unique is that the intense suffering seems also to be divine chastening for sin. Not all physical suffering or affliction at the hands of enemies is chastening for sin. However, when devout believers find themselves in such trying situations, they naturally will do some soul searching to see if they in fact are being chastened (Ps. 44). (Ross, *Psalms, Volume 1*, 271)

The recovery world calls this "cleaning up our side of the street."

Because of God's faithful love (*hesed*), we humbled sinners find relief and refuge, comfort and peace in Him...no matter what. In Christ, we seek justice and love mercy, walking humbly with our God, for the sake of the world.